

Statement of Support for HB 356 – Human Relations – Protection of the Free Exercise of Religion

Thank you, Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the Government, Labor, and Elections Committee, for this opportunity to support HB 356.

I testified last year for its predecessor, HB 1019, and return to support passage of this years bill. Maryland's 1649 Toleration Act pioneered religious liberty, and HB 356 honors our State's legacy by codifying protections like the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act; essentially at the state level since the 1997 Supreme Court ruling that federal RFRA doesn't bind states.

This bill provides a balanced framework under Article 36 of our Declaration of Rights, safeguarding sincere religious exercise for all faith traditions against undue government burdens, while preserving public safety and preventing harm to others.

Addressing fiscal concerns from last year and this year: The note speculated on litigation costs, but these are uncertain and mirror expenses for upholding other liberties, like free speech or equality.

May I remind the committee that over two dozen states have RFRA's without any reports of budgetary ruin.

My only question - is there a price tag on liberty Maryland is willing to set?

Protecting the conscience strengthens our society and far outweighs hypothetical costs.

I urge this committee to give a favorable report to HB 356. By doing so you will ensure religious freedom thrives for every Marylander.

Thank you for your time.